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# Relationship problems: How abuse in intimate relationships affects men, women, and their children.

## Article

Marika Guggisberg was born and raised in Switzerland. She has extensive experience in working with female and child survivors of domestic violence. Her background is in education, social work and psychology. She has recently been awarded Master of Criminal Justice by the University of Western Australia, Perth where she is currently working on her PhD research dissertation.

Intimate relationships are extremely complex, involving a series of interactions between two people, which affect feelings, judgements and expectations about each other. Being involved in an intimate relationship is usually associated with experiencing strong emotional feelings of belonging and commitment towards another individual. This close attachment means that emotional distress may be caused during the maintenance, disruption and termination of an intimate relationship (Browne & Herbert, 1997). Research continues to indicate that violence against women appears to be a prevalent problem worldwide, cutting across geographic, socio-economic, and religious lines (e.g. Bartol & Bartol, 2005; Hanmer, 2000; Harwin & Barron, 2000). While the abuse of intimate partners receives great attention from the public, a development that is much needed, it appears that the acknowledgement of this serious problem may stop at the doors of many churches.

This paper considers direct and indirect consequences of abuse to women in intimate relationships. It firstly explores the difficulty in recognising spousal abuse and highlights warning signs of possible abuse in intimate relationships. Secondly, circumstances, which can lead to unintended alliances, and victim-blaming are also discussed. Thirdly, the moral justification theory is introduced, which offers a possible explanation of the occurrence of the abuse.

Fourthly, effects on abuse for victimised women are discussed. Particular focus is laid on mental health issues and compensatory behaviours associated with experiences of abuse in intimate relationships. Finally, the role of children in families where abuse is taking place is discussed. The possibility of secondary victimisation is stressed. The discussion leads to the conclusion that churches have a unique opportunity to comprehensively address issues of abuse in intimate relationships. Recommendations are made to openly raise awareness about women's experiences of abuse in the home, and to offer assistance and support for victims and perpetrators equally. The paper provides suggestions of what churches can do to acknowledge this serious problem within their communities. Before proceeding to the discussion, this paper defines 'spousal abuse', which is used interchangeably with the term commonly used among professionals, 'intimate partner violence'.

## Defining intimate partner violence

The author suggests that intimate partner abuse comes from one partner's decision (usually the male partner in a heterosexual relationship) to claim a higher status than the other partner. Therefore, abuse may be defined as the product of a culture, which excuses and condones exploitation and promotes superiority, and that casts the blame for the abuse on the oppressed.

Intimate partner violence is defined as "any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship" (Gavin & Gillam, 2005 p. 2). It has been demonstrated by considerable international research that intimate partner violence, previously known as domestic violence, is a significant social, public health, and criminal justice issue with up to 70 % of women experiencing intimate partner violence sometime in their lives (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996).

Abuse of women in intimate relationships touches an unimaginable number of lives. The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2004) has found that intimate partner abuse is the number one cause of injury, disability, illness and even death in

women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. In fact, approximately one in four female suicide attempts are associated with domestic abuse (Guggisberg, 2006).

## Difficulty in recognising abuse

### *A word of caution*

One of the obstacles in recognising intimate partner violence is that many abusive men simply do not seem like abusers. Church leaders and friends may think the world of them. Abusive men may have a successful work life, no problems with drugs or alcohol, and appear to be very kind and humorous. Not surprisingly, such men simply may not fit the general image of an abusive, intimidating person.

Female partners may recognise symptoms of abuse, when nobody else can see them. For example, perpetrators may be irritated when they do not get their own way; or by accusing their partners and persuading them that everything is their fault. They may believe that they know what is best for their female partners, controlling their lives and forbidding contact with particular people. Particularly, when women try to stand up to abusive men, they 'make her pay for it'.

Church counsellors who work with abusive and controlling men need to face such perplexing issues. They may need to understand that a man's version of the abuse may be worlds apart from the woman's experiences of victimising events.

## Warning signs

There are many warning signs of abuse in intimate relationships that not only women can watch out for, but also church representatives. For example, men attending church communities may accept messages that confirm their perceived superior status as males, which elevate them into positions of dominance and power. Men with abusive tendencies may even use their biblical understanding towards gender roles. Church leaders and counsellors can benefit from knowledge about beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of male members in their communities to recognise potential abusers. In working with abusive men church counsellors also need to be

cautious and avoid traps because abusers may use manipulative strategies to align with them.

## Advocate for the abuser?

It is important to recognise that church representatives can become vocal advocates for the abusive man. Abusive men may use sophisticated strategies to get friends, relatives, and church representatives to feel sorry for them and put pressure on the victimised women (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Jones, 2000; Walker, 1989). They can, for example, get an “official seal of approval” for their denial of being abusive as well as for their view, that the female partners are mentally ill (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). In this regard, it needs to be acknowledged that abusive men may be very creative in shaping church counsellor’s views of their female partners to get them to support the abuser’s stance. Thus, church counsellors should refrain from judging women based on men’s descriptions of their partners. They need to acknowledge that abusive men may not be a reliable source of information. Moreover, many abusers present themselves as being the victims in abusive relationships (Bartol & Bartol, 2005; Walker, 1989; Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006).

### **Victim-Blaming**

Abusive men usually turn their attention to the abused women in their post-victimised states, explaining what is wrong with them (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Dutton & Golant, 1995; Guggisberg, 2006; Jones, 2000). Researchers and professionals refer to this practice as victim-blaming. Unfortunately, this practice also dominates popular thinking about intimate partner violence. Consequently, instead of experiencing understanding and sympathy, victimised women may find themselves to be blamed either tacitly or directly by their intimate partners, family, friends, and church representatives.

It can be argued that many church counsellors, due to lack of knowledge about the issue of domestic abuse, may assume the values of the public, and believe that in some circumstances ‘some force’ may be justifiable. They therefore may

conclude that the occurrence of intimate partner abuse is a result of the women's failure to maintain family stability or meet their partner's demands. Having worked with abused women and children for many years, the author argues that, some churches not only tend to enforce stereotypical and traditional sex roles, but also may employ counsellors who wrongly place the responsibility for the occurrence of abuse on the victimised women. Such attitudes of victim-blaming confirm abused women's beliefs that they are responsible for the experience of intimate partner violence. This may lead to increased feelings of guilt, sadness, helplessness and hopelessness.

### **Manipulation**

Another critical aspect of abuse is control and coercion. The abusive partners way of manipulation can involve various tactics to keep his partner from revealing to outsiders that she is abused (Jones, 2000; Walsh & Weeks, 2004). In some cases, the abusive men may use overt pressure, including threats, to enforce secret-keeping (Jones, 2000; Walker, 2000). Women who disclose abuse, may suffer physical or emotional retaliation by the abuser. Thus, it is important to take steps to relieve any burden of secrecy that women (and also children) may be carrying.

## **Causes of spousal abuse**

Many theoretical frameworks seek to explain the causes of intimate partner violence, assigning different levels of responsibility to individuals and the society. For example, in the area of criminal justice, the focus is usually laid on the individual and the interaction between the offender and the victim, which suggests individual responsibility. However, cultural explanations suggest social facets of abuse. Culture has been defined as "a dynamic system consisting of interrelated components... that greatly influences what we do and how we do it" (Ward et al. 2006, p. 168). Moral Justification Theory suggests that most violence is undertaken for what the offender believes to be morally justified reasons and that the victim needs to be corrected for misbehaviour (Smithy & Straus, 2003). In this regard, perpetrators may perceive themselves as the "good", while the victims are believed to be the "bad". The abuser

perceives himself as defending moral standards in which he believes, such as that the husband should be the “head of the household”. As can be seen, some of the causes of intimate partner violence may be inherent in unequal relationship systems, where differences in the power of men and women are upheld.

### ***Inequality in relationships***

The inequality between partners in intimate relationships is associated with an increased risk of intimate partner violence because dominance by one partner must ultimately be backed by force (Smithey & Straus, 2003). In this context it can be argued that women in church communities where equality between husbands and wives is not explicitly supported may be particularly prone to intimate partner violence. As a result, allegations of intimate partner violence may not only routinely be minimised by perpetrators, but also ignored by church counsellors. In some cases, these counsellors may even support abusive men denying all evidence of abuse.

## **Effects of intimate partner violence**

### ***Abused women’s shattered self-conception***

Experiencing violence from a known, trusted, and loved person tends to be more psychologically damaging than any violence that is perpetrated by a stranger (e.g. Bartol & Bartol, 2005; Guggisberg, 2006). It is argued that negative psychological effects of intimate partner violence may be more severe than violence experienced from a stranger, due to individual beliefs about victimised women’s control over such events. In addition to fear and anxiety, a woman suffering from intimate partner violence may lose her sense of self-worth (Bartol & Bartol, 2005). The experience of victimisation can shatter a woman’s belief of a safe and predictable relationship. Thus, the essential problem of intimate partner victimisation may be the loss of a sense of value and worth, which appears to disturb victims for a long time afterwards.

## Abused women and their mental health

### **Emotional Abuse**

Intimate partner violence does not necessarily involve only physical and sexual abuse; it may also include forms of emotional abuse and threats. Many women are never physically abused but have to live with verbal assaults, humiliation, sexual coercion, and other psychological abuse. Scars from mental abuse can be equally deep and long-lasting, with the difference that they are often not obvious. Some researchers argue that emotional abuse may cause even greater harm than wounds from punches, slaps or kicks (e.g. Fraser, 2003).

### **Mental health issues**

For centuries it was considered that women's biology, the feminine personality, and jealousy of men made females distinctively susceptible to mental ill health (Guggisberg, 2001, 2006; Sabini, 1995). Moreover, it was believed that the feminine psychopathology was the original cause of spousal abuse and dysfunctional families (Taft, 2003). Sabini explains that early scientists, who followed the Freudian theory, considered women in general to be prone to hysteria, which originated from their problematic dualism of penis envy and the way their reproductive functions influenced their state of mind. He further argues that these early theories have heavily influenced the mental health professions and their understanding of depression. In recent years there has been considerable empirical evidence suggesting that female mental health disorders are caused by intimate partner violence rather than the violence being caused by women's mental ill-health (e.g. Guggisberg, 2006).

Many studies have concluded that intimate partner violence had a significant negative impact on women's mental health. For example, Taft, Watson and Lee (2004) noted that women who had recently been abused by their intimate partners were thirteen times more likely to report depression or anxiety disorders. The development of severe psychological symptoms can be explained by the particularly damaging effect of experiencing fear and anxiety (Bartol & Bartol, 2005). Chronic

high stress levels may lead to mental health conditions as severe as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Barlow & Durand, 2005; Fraser, 2003).

### **Self-Blame**

An outstanding characteristic of victim behaviour is the degree to which abused women internalise the blame and responsibility for the experience of abuse (Browne & Herbert, 1997; Jones, 2000; Walker, 1989). Professionals working with abuse victims know that many of the women believe that they 'cause' the abuse by for example, arguing with their partner or defying orders. These women usually believe that their actions provoke, and in some way justify, the abusive action. It cannot be stressed enough that abused women often are persuaded by their intimate partners that they are responsible for the abuse. Moreover, abusive partners may continuously infer that they are incompetent, and hysterical. This may deepen their beliefs of provoking abuse.

### **Coping Strategies**

Victimised women may develop a wide range of coping strategies (Browne & Herbert, 1997; Jones, 2000; Kennedy Bergen, 2006). For example, many abused women try to avert injury by compliant behaviour. Women usually try hard to pacify their abusive partners and remove any cause for violence. They may reason, "If I let him have his way, I won't get hurt". Raquel Kennedy Bergen (2006) for example, noted that women who are sexually abused by their partners are not only likely to be abused many times, but also experience several forms of unwanted sex including oral and anal intercourse. From a victimised woman's viewpoint, compliance is a way to survive. In addition, many women develop an ambivalent loyalty to their intimate partners. Despite their emotional and/or physical pain and anger, they may defend their partner's actions with explanations such as "He didn't mean to hurt me". Abused women may love their partners very much and only want the abuse to end, and the relationship to continue.

### **Compensatory behaviours**

Extensive research into intimate partner violence suggests that compensatory behaviours are commonly found among victims. Victimised women may develop addictions by abusing for example psychoactive substances (Anderson, Harris, &

Madl, 1998; Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Moreover, eating disorders (bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, binge-eating) are commonly found among victims of intimate partner violence (Russel, 1998).

It is not surprising that abused women frequently are described as having high dependence on their partners; suffer from anxiety; depression, and low self-esteem. They may perceive themselves to have no control over their lives or environment. This may lead to alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide ideation.

### **Suicide**

Suicide is officially one of the leading causes of death worldwide (Guggisberg, 2006), and most epidemiologists agree that the actual number of suicides may be two or three times higher (Barlow & Durand, 2005). As Barlow and Durand further note, a strong relationship exists between feelings of hopelessness and suicide ideation.

## **Children in abusive families**

The abuse of women affects children negatively. Life with an abusive father can be stressful and confusing not only for the abused women, but for children in the home. Children may watch arguments, listen to screaming and name-calling. If the abusive parent is physically scary, punching walls, knocking over chairs, or striking the mother, feelings of fear may be elevated even during calm periods in the home. Children may feel guilt either because they may believe they have caused the mother to be abused or because they think they should have found some way of preventing the abuse. Therefore, it is fair to state that spousal abuse affects the whole family.

Children's feelings about each parent can swing to extremes. In times they may hate the abuser and in other times they may idealise him. This may result in blaming the mother for the abuse. Children may be growing up in an atmosphere of absorbing the abusive father's messages that the mother is irrational, incompetent, or illogical. Not surprisingly, children may come to see their mother as inferior to

other people because they have learned to see the mother through the abusive father's eyes. As a result, mothers may struggle to keep their relationship with their children strong.

### *Role Models*

Abusive men's behaviour inevitably communicates to the children that having power over other people is a desirable goal. This hinders the understanding that equality, mutual respect and cooperation can lead to a fulfilling life. It is therefore possible that sons of abusers when they reach adolescence begin to manipulate girls into exploitive relationships. Children of abusive fathers may lack empathy because they have been conditioned to shut themselves off to caring about feelings for females. Unless children in abusive families find strong counter examples in churches they may run the risk of internalising a rigid, abuse-prone view of what men and women inherently are.

Children's parents are usually their first and foremost important source of sex-role definition and identification. Abusive fathers may teach children (whether intentionally or not) to perceive women in the same degrading light that they have cast on the children's mothers. For example, it can easily be observed that daughters of abusive men often have profound self-esteem problems. This is not surprising considering that many abusive men teach their daughters how valueless and unworthy of respect they are. Sons of abusive men may in turn be disparaging of and superior to girls and women.

In summary, intimate partner violence can have significant traumatic effects on children (McInnes, 2004; Tomison, 2001). Children, as a result of being exposed to intimate partner violence may feel fearful and even guilty. In addition, multiple studies have demonstrated that men who abuse their partners are far more likely than non-abusive men to abuse children too (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Accordingly, Guggisberg contends that “victimisation in childhood may lead on to victimisation in adulthood” (2006, p. 3).

## Contributing to an abuse free society

Intimate partner violence can be compared with a cyclone that leaves destruction behind it as it rips through the lives of women and children. The destruction may include fear, bitterness, humiliation, physical and psychological injury, and loss of self-confidence. No woman should live this way – neither should her children.

Our churches have a stake in ending abuse. Church leaders have unique opportunities to comprehensively address issues of intimate partner violence and to provide assistance and support for both, the abuser and the abused.

## Recommendations

### ***Pamphlets***

Churches can reach abusive men and abused women equally by for example displaying brochures against intimate partner violence. The main purpose of these pamphlets may be to inform and educate the church community about the church’s values and teaching.

### ***Breaking the silence***

Churches need to break the silence. The message must be clearly delivered, saying that an abusive man is responsible for his own actions, and refuse to let him blame the victim. Churches must also break the silence about the pain an abusive man has been causing the abused woman and insisting that the responsibility to

change rests on his shoulders alone. With such actions, an abuser's sense of justification and entitlement may start to shrink, and change can begin.

### **Counselling**

One-on-one approaches to overcoming abuse in intimate relationships may work well only when the whole church community first creates an environment in which the victims are supported and the abusers are held accountable. Church leaders can therefore play a crucial role in making their church "abuse free", a haven where abused women can count on complete support and where abusers know that they will not succeed in gaining acceptance for their excuses.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has considered the adverse effects of abuse in intimate relationships for abused women and their children and has highlighted the role of church representatives. It has been established that prejudicial beliefs about the role of women may re-victimise victims and that church representatives may 'accidentally' support the abuse by becoming aligned with the abusive partner. As a result, women who experience spousal abuse may not only be reluctant to speak out and seek much needed help, but also lose hope. The women's emotional pain may become very severe. Feelings of hopelessness may have serious health and spiritual consequences. Not only can mental suffering become particularly life threatening, but the thought that nobody seems to understand what abused women may go through can shatter their very foundations of belief in God.

Counsellors and church leaders need to be informed and educated about intimate partner violence. Furthermore, in working with abusive men they need to acknowledge the abusive and condemn such behaviour as completely unacceptable. Not doing this actually serves the interests of the perpetrators. If the counsellor communicates that the couple's problems are partly the woman's fault and partly the man's fault – 'relationship problems' – may not be solved, because the abuser has been justified in his thinking that he is also a victim. Thus, it is important for church leaders to understand that there are pitfalls. Church representatives can unknowingly

collude with the abuse, which as a result inevitably abandons the abused woman and her children. Such responses even abandon the abusive male intimate partner, since they keep him from ever dealing with the problem of abusive behaviours.

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